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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BOGOTA 011814

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: DAS DIRECTOR PENATE MAY RESIGN OVER URIBE REPROACH

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood, Reason: 1.4 (b) & (d)

1. (C) On December 20, Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS) Director Andres Penate told polcouns that he was upset with President Uribe for excoriating him in public after he tried to correct the record regarding Venezuelan allegations that GOC military officials were working with former Venezuelan military officers to overthrow Hugo Chavez. Penate said he would be meeting with the President later in the day, at which point he would decide whether he could stay on. He also said he was scheduled to leave in the evening for a meeting with GOV Interior and Justice Minister Jesse Chacon on December 21.

ALLEGATIONS BY CHAVEZ HAVE BEEN ONGOING

2. (C) According to Penate, Chavez has been accusing the DAS and the CIA for months of conspiracies against his life. During a meeting last month, Chavez raised the matter again with Uribe, who asked for evidence. In a follow-on meeting, Chacon gave Colombian Minister of Foreign Affairs Carolina Barco an address and picture of a building in Bogota, stating that this was the cite of the "secret office where Colombian military and CIA officers were plotting." Chacon said the GOV could prove it was a secret CIA location in Bogota because they had seen U.S. Embassy cars entering and exiting.

3. (S) Upon her return to Bogota, Barco gave the address and picture to Penate, who immediately realized it was the Intelligence School of the Army. He called the director of the school to inquire whether any former Venezuelan military officers had visited in recent months. The director responded that Venezuelan officers in Bogota had been invited "many times" to offer their perspectives on the military in Venezuela, in particular its evolving relationship with Chavez. The school director went on to say, according to Penate, that these former Venezuelan military officers had been the source for several reports prepared for Minister of Defense policy makers on the status of the Venezuelan military.

4. (C) Penate said he reprimanded the school's director for poor judgment given the sensitive relationship between Colombia and Venezuela and the "temporary special visa" status of some of these officers. (Note: the GOC has rejected requests for refugee status for several of the officers involved in the 2002 coup against Chavez but they have been allowed to remain in Colombia to secure refugee status from a third country.) Penate then prepared a report for the Minister of Defense, stating that there was no/no coup plotting but rather routine intelligence gathering. At the same time, Penate underscored to polcouns that, given the "proclivities of his predecessors," he could not say definitively whether they had ever had any "unauthorized discussions" with the Venezuelans.

5. (C) Penate continued that the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defense briefed the President last week on the matter, and the latter became angry at the military for putting him in a difficult position. With a meeting scheduled with Chavez on December 17 in Santa Marta, Uribe decided that he would tell his Venezuelan counterpart "the truth" about the encounters. Penate noted that the Venezuelans immediately made the matter public and the Venezuelan press played it as a GOC acknowledgment of Chavez's allegations.

6. (C) By Sunday, December 18, Penate said the story was getting out of hand and he grew frustrated that other GOC ministers were not responding, fueling Venezuelan conclusions that the plotting was true. At that point, he decided he could help the President by correcting the record. He told the press that the encounters were "ill-judged meetings for academic purposes." He said he deliberately used that word "academic" because he did not want to reveal the encounters were for intelligence gathering. Penate said the President reacted badly because he did not want anyone to say anything, and criticized him in public. Penate acknowledged that his judgment may have been off the mark but subsequent public comments by the President had only made the situation worse and gave the impression that something nefarious was indeed going on.

TOUGH START ON THE JOB

17. (C) Penate said he was trying hard to repair the damage inflicted on the DAS by the former director (Jorge Norguera) and deputy (Jose Miguel Narvaez). In his first few days on the job, Penate fired DAS directors in Boyaca Meta and several other departments because they were "bad guys," in some cases collaborating with paramilitaries. He cited in particular the former DAS director of Boyaca who Penate claimed was receiving monthly large sums of money from local paramilitaries. Penate complained that recent allegations of his family links to Rodrigo Tova Pupo, alias "Jorge 40," were retaliation for his swift action against corrupt DAS officials.
WOOD